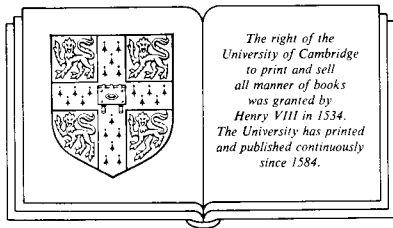
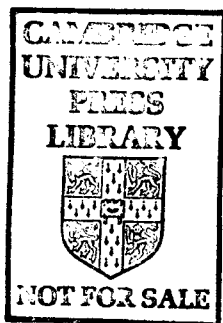


PEASANTS AND IMPERIAL RULE

*Agriculture and Agrarian Society in
the Bombay Presidency, 1850–1935*

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Introduction: The peasant in India and Bombay Presidency

The peasantry is not just 'the awkward class' but also the typical class. Historically, most men's occupation has been within small-scale agriculture and examining change and development in this context is therefore vital to any realistic understanding of the evolution of the modern world. That is the root justification for this study of the agrarian economy and society of one major province of British India, the Bombay Presidency, in the period between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1930s. As a methodology, in the face of the daunting potential scope of the subject, three distinct areas of enquiry will predominate. Firstly, we need to investigate the economics of agriculture and changes within it; the financing of operations, the types of crops grown, the methods employed and, so far as possible, the levels and trends in output performance. Yet agriculture does not operate in a vacuum. Land tenure and the structure of power and status in the village determine its context. In turn, agricultural developments can create agrarian change: extending commercialisation of agriculture, for example, might prove an engine of revolution within traditional patterns of landownership, land tenure and peasant social relationships. Thirdly, in British India, the imperial rulers, dependent on the village for revenue and the mass acquiescence which guaranteed their political security, were always intimately concerned with rural issues. So our study must also, in part, be a study of British agrarian and revenue policy and its effects. From these subjects, hopefully, might emerge some answers about the dominant themes of the Bombay countryside's history: the genuine occurrence of economic diversification and change without, in developmental terms, the revolutionary consequences evident in many Western societies.

All the particular issues provide wide scope for speculation and debate. They were central to the polemics of the 'great tradition' of British Indian economic and social history – that of Marx, Curzon and Dutt – which painted contrary sweeping images of the beneficent diffusion of advanced economic techniques and civilisation or the impoverishment of India through a parasitic imperialism. If we are to 'judge' British rule, then the rural economy and society because of its vast numerical predominance must be the true test. Thus when Morris argued the thesis of 'rather sub-

stantial increases in total real output in the Indian economy in the nineteenth century¹ he was primarily advancing an argument about agricultural performance. Yet assessing the balance of that performance is extremely difficult. Morris' case rests on a wide range of indicators: the steady expansion of the cultivated acreage in most provinces, the extensive development of commercial crops, notably cotton and jute, for export, the marked, sometimes spectacular, rises in crop and land prices. Further, it would be difficult to argue that the state siphoned off in taxation a disproportionately high share of any increment. Land revenue levels, even if excessive in the early years of British rule, probably failed to keep up with general price increases during the late nineteenth century – self-evidently so in permanently settled Bengal – and were then further cut down, in real terms, by the more rapid inflation of the period 1900–20.²

Any agricultural expansion in the nineteenth century, too, took place against a background of only slow aggregate growth in population. As late as the period between 1891 and 1921 the population within the boundaries of the present-day state of India increased merely from 235.9 million to 248.1 million, a rise of just 5.17 per cent over the thirty years.³ Unspectacular increases in total overall output seemed, therefore, required to improve per capita performance perceptibly. This general pattern, though, provides a false illusion of stability. It masked quite swift short-term increases in population accompanied by periodic bursts of high mortality, caused by famine and disease. Bombay Presidency was strikingly subject to this process:⁴ its population was sharply cut back by serious famine in the late 1870s and late 1890s and by the influenza epidemic at the end of the First World War. As Klein has argued,⁵ it is hard to see buoyancy in this situation. Yet nineteenth-century famine may have been primarily the product of commercial and social change – for example, the creation of a newly vulnerable minority – and not an inevitable indicator of decline in aggregate output. Sluggish overall population growth, substantially created by occasional high mortality, is also the story of late

1 Morris D. Morris, 'Towards a Reinterpretation of Nineteenth Century Indian Economic History', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 5, 1, March 1968, p. 11.

2 D. A. Washbrook, 'Law, State and Agrarian Society in India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 15, 3, July 1981, p. 671.

3 See *Census of India, 1951* (Delhi, 1953), Vol. 1, India, Part 1A, Report, p. 122.

4 In the Visarias' 'West Zone' the population growth rate was notably below the all-India norm between 1871 and 1941. Leela and Pravin Visaria, 'Population', in Dharma Kumar, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol. 2* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 490.

5 Ira Klein, 'Population and Agriculture in Northern India, 1872–1971', *Modern Asian Studies*, 8, 2, April 1974, pp. 191–216.

Tokugawa Japan and here many have drawn from this data optimistic conclusions about long-term agricultural trends.⁶

After about 1920, however, Indian population started to grow much more quickly and consistently. Output and earnings now, apparently, required rapid expansion even to maintain per capita levels and in the late 1920s the onset of depression struck a severe blow at commercial agriculture. Even so, in the inter-war years there was no major famine in India, no fundamental crisis of subsistence. So Morris' case might be extended over the whole British period, not just the nineteenth century. Indeed one could argue that, by the sort of 'test' which is often applied to agriculture's role in Japanese or British industrialisation, agriculture in British India played a stimulatory role within the economy. It provided government with a major revenue raiser in the form of the land tax. Its cash-crop exports were a vital earner of foreign exchange. Further, the famine evidence of the late British period does not suggest automatic decline in per capita foodgrain availability.⁷

However, a less sanguine interpretation of events can be presented. Understanding the meaning of population changes and famine incidence is undoubtedly a difficult matter. Population increase, for example, seems to have begun to accelerate first in Bengal, the very province where pressure on land was, in places, already acute and where expansions of the cultivated acreage, by the late nineteenth century, were much less extensive. A marked deterioration of the land-labour ratio apparently occurred here after 1870 at a time when, we are told, productivity was not

6 Writers such as T. C. Smith, Kozo Yamamura, Susan Hanley and E. S. Crawcour have created a new orthodoxy on Tokugawa Japan that change and growth in agriculture throughout the Tokugawa period (1600–1868) firmly laid the foundation for Meiji development. Few would dispute the thesis of expansion in the first half of the period, but between the 1720s and the mid-nineteenth century the evidence is complex. Unlike in the seventeenth century, cultivated acreage was now expanding very little. Overall population growth, too, became minimal, partly, the writers argue, because of conscious restrictions on size of family but also, clearly, through the persistence of famine down to the 1830s. The argument, which might also be applied to British India, remains that, even with slowly improving productivity, the low population growth in aggregate terms meant rising per capita output, whilst social change and extending commercialisation diversified the products of agriculture. For this interpretation, see particularly T. C. Smith, *The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan* (Stanford, 1959), and Susan B. Hanley and Kozo Yamamura, 'Population Trends and Economic Growth in Pre-industrial Japan', in D. V. Glass and Roger Revelle, eds., *Population and Social Change* (London, 1972), pp. 451–99. However, for a challenge, see also Seymour Broadbridge, 'Economic and Social Trends in Tokugawa Japan', *Modern Asian Studies*, 8, 3, July 1974, pp. 347–72.

7 For a fuller statement of the general argument that agriculture's role in British India's economic development was less inhibitive than traditionally assumed, see my *British Rule and the Indian Economy, 1800–1914* (London, 1982).

improving.⁸ Yet Bengal, too, avoided famine until the disaster of 1943 complicated by the dislocations of the war: can its peasants genuinely have avoided a decline in per capita mass consumption? On the other hand, nineteenth-century famine was no respecter of traditionally more prosperous regions. One possible pointer to agricultural decline was the striking of serious crises in areas hitherto apparently immune. In western India, for example, the famines of the late 1890s affected not just the 'famine belt' east Deccan, where rainfall was always unreliable, but 'secure' parts of Gujarat, the Konkan and the Southern Maratha Country. This may reflect particular climatic or ecological problems or, equally, could suggest fatal flaws in the process of agricultural expansion. Much of the new land brought under the plough during the British period may have been marginal. Officials sometimes commented that capital and labour spent on the clearing of waste land might have been more profitably invested in better techniques applied to land already cultivated.

One problem with the argument for agricultural buoyancy lies in explaining the impetus behind any supposed increase in productivity. The technology of most Indian agriculture changed little. The provision of new canal irrigation facilities was the greatest source of improvement but, except in the Punjab and parts of the United Provinces, was too scantily spread to revolutionise peasant production. Attempts to generate more capital in agriculture through co-operative societies or government action against moneylenders apparently enjoyed patchy success. Yet the pessimistic conclusions of Blyn's quantitative study,⁹ based on the agricultural statistics from the 1890s to 1947, have provided no definitive conclusion to the argument. The deficiencies of the output figures are serious. The basic mechanism of collection was open to serious abuse and miscalculation and subjective assessments, as on 'quality of season', which so shaped many provinces' statistics, may have been significantly influenced by political pressures on local administrations.¹⁰ At the broadest all-India level, statistical enquiry has borne some fruits, but

8 Rajat Ray claims that in Bengal between 1901 and 1921 cultivated acreage actually decreased whilst the population it was required to support went up by 10.8 per cent. See Rajat Ray, 'The Crisis of Bengal Agriculture 1870-1927 - the Dynamics of Immobility', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 10, 3, September 1973, pp. 244-79.

9 George Blyn, *Agricultural Trends in India, 1891-1947: Output, Availability and Productivity* (Philadelphia, 1966).

10 On the deficiencies of the collection procedure, see Clive Dewey, 'Patwari and Chaukidar: Subordinate Officials and the Reliability of India's Agricultural Statistics', in Clive Dewey and A. G. Hopkins, eds., *The Imperial Impact. Studies in the Economic History of Africa and India* (London, 1978), pp. 280-314. For the influence of subjective factors on the Bombay agricultural statistics see Alan W. Heston, 'Official Yields Per Acre in India, 1886-1947: Some Questions of Interpretation', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 10, 4, December 1973, pp. 303-32.

detailed provincial disaggregation for the nineteenth century remains intractable.¹¹ Deduction from the weight of empirical evidence, then, rather than dependence on statistics will be the main methodology of our examination of agricultural trends.

Agrarian change – shifts in patterns of landownership and tenure and its consequences – has equally proved the subject of radically different interpretations. Current orthodoxy now typically stresses continuity: that, whatever the illusion of tenurial turmoil, landowning elites and peasant cultivators in most localities came from substantially the same groups in 1947 as in 1850. The Sahotas of Kessinger's Vilyatpur,¹² Stokes' peasant elite¹³ remain throughout the dominant figures in their local agriculture. In the U.P., again, 'the stability of the great estates in the post-1860 period' is 'striking',¹⁴ whilst Dharma Kumar's Madras exhibits 'very little change in the degree of inequality between 1853–54 and 1945–46'.¹⁵ Change of personnel, of course, occurred, sometimes abruptly. Undeniably ownership of many estates in Bengal changed hands following the Permanent Settlement of 1793 but even here, apparently, 'many of the land transfers were made to relatives, dependents and former employees of the old zamindars'.¹⁶ There was, then, no revolution in the real substance of agrarian social structure.

Undoubtedly this interpretation has substantial attractions. Against it the traditional recital of alleged social change on the land – growing peasant indebtedness and dispossession, land transfer to 'new' proprietary groups, the creation of a pauperised agrarian proletariat – looks simplistic. The latter drew its authority from the literature created by British officialdom but, arguably, much of this mistakenly accepted institutional

11 Thus it seems clear now that overall per capita national income rose, to some degree, in the century before 1920. For a survey of the assessments, see A. Heston, 'National Income', in Kumar, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 2, pp. 376–462. At the same time, however, *The Cambridge Economic History* conspicuously fails to provide any detailed statistical coverage of long-term agricultural trends in the provinces.

12 Tom G. Kessinger, *Vilyatpur 1848–1968* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1974).

13 Eric Stokes, 'The Structure of Landholding in Uttar Pradesh, 1860–1948'. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 12, 2, April–June 1975, pp. 113–32. Reprinted as Ch. 9 of *The Peasant and the Raj. Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1978).

14 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

15 Dharma Kumar, 'Landownership and Inequality in Madras Presidency: 1853–54 to 1946–47', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 12, 3, July–September 1975, p. 242.

16 John R. McLane, 'Revenue Farming and the Zamindari System in Eighteenth Century Bengal', in R. E. Frykenberg, ed., *Land Tenure and Peasant in South Asia* (New Delhi, 1977), p. 29.

change at its face value and failed to see the subtle adaptation to continuity underneath. Hence the alien intruder into landownership, the spectre raised by such as Thorburn, has now been largely replaced in the literature by the successful representative of established peasant groups. Further, even where the latter is seen as expanding ownership, a revisionist view of the economic and social consequences is still possible. Physical eviction of poor peasants was by no means automatic. Often, where a peasant 'lost' legal proprietorship of his holding, he remained its cultivator: the landlord was not going to take to the plough himself. Many 'land transfers' were really the conversion of a long-established creditor-debtor relationship into one of landlord and tenant. This may be simple adaptation to the Westernised legal forms introduced by British rule, enabling the creditor to protect his interests more effectively in the new institutional climate. If so, there is clearly continuity in the economic relationship: the cultivator remains the same person and he continues to render a proportion of his proceeds to a figure who, according to taste, can be seen as patron or exploiter.

The new orthodoxy of agrarian continuity also accords with political realities and developments. On late Tsarist Russia Shanin has argued that the interpretation, founded by Lenin, of social revolution on the land little accords with observed historical events.¹⁷ If Russian agrarian society had really become stratified – 'depeasantised' Lenin had called it – into a commercial elite and a mass depressed proletariat, then why was there not political evidence of class tension, why did the poor peasant masses not rise up against their oppressors? In India too, it is hard to correlate the complexion of peasant political behaviour with, say, the argument for the creation of a large new class of landless labourers. Rural campaigns became a vital adjunct to nationalist activity after Gandhi's rise, but they hardly suggested cross-currents and tensions based on violent economic differentiation. Unlike perhaps in China, there was never political breakdown in the countryside, never the development of widespread peasant alienation from the social and political system. Transitions in political power, such as Reeves' demise of the traditional landlords in the U.P.,¹⁸ tended to be accomplished smoothly. In sum, the wider history of India's rural society suggests the continued involvement and control of established groups rather than the creation of a new peasant proletariat which would have had nothing to lose in turbulence and revolution.

17 Teodor Shanin, 'Socio-economic Mobility and the Rural History of Russia, 1905–1930', *Soviet Studies*, 23, 1971–2, pp. 222–35, and *The Awkward Class* (Oxford, 1972).

18 P. D. Reeves, 'Landlords and Party Politics in the United Provinces, 1934–37', in D. A. Low, ed., *Soundings in Modern South Asian History* (London, 1968), pp. 261–93.

Continuity, therefore, makes much sense. Yet one might wonder whether social historians' praiseworthy zeal to stress the adaptability of established structures and groups now requires such prominence: some emphasis might return to the developments which called forth the need to adapt. The economic historian is bound to be struck by the extensive and powerful innovations of British rule: the expansion of the cultivated acreage and of cash-crop agriculture, the improvements in communications and the rising value of and demand for land. Many of these economic forces had widespread consequences. One specific example can be given: by the early twentieth century the size of units of cultivation indisputably had fallen in many regions. Despite first appearances, this did not necessarily mean that overall land availability per cultivator was deteriorating, for the most striking factor – at any rate in Bombay – appears to be the growing division of peasant holdings into a larger number of individual plots.¹⁹ This very process of fragmentation, however, must have had considerable effects on agriculture and its organisation. It apparently limited the scope for technological change involving economies of scale. On the other hand, small plots which could have made only a marginal contribution to family subsistence needs may have encouraged trends towards cash-cropping and provided a powerful force for the fuller incorporation of the peasant within the market economy.

The Indian rural economy and society, therefore, have to be seen, whatever their underlying stability, as entities undergoing constant economic flux and change. One obvious example can be given of the rapidity with which changes can occur in quite basic agricultural patterns: under the impact of the American Civil War, total cotton acreage in the Bombay Presidency leapt up from just 1.00 million acres in 1860–1 to 1.98 million acres by 1869–70 only to decline again during the 1870s.²⁰ Here alone is an important story. The mechanics of the developments must have been complex: the financing of the expansion, the degree of commitment to the market and its organisation and, later, the process of reducing the scale of cotton cultivation. These issues themselves suggest another, more fundamental, question. Why did the whirlpool of flux, such as that created by the American War cotton boom, fail to produce revolutionary long-term structural change? Manifestly the Indian agriculturist during the British period was neither depeasantised nor simply converted into a large capitalist farmer. For the Indian countryside, too, cash-crop export was not the route to substantial economic development

19 For a fuller discussion of this phenomenon, see Chapter 7.

20 See my 'Agrarian Society and British Administration in Western India, 1847–1920' (University of Cambridge, unpublished Ph. D. thesis, 1974), Ch. 2.

which it provided for the white dominions of the British Empire. At the same time, there was so little question of mass exodus from the countryside that industrial historians can sometimes speak of labour supply as an important problem of Indian industrialisation. Flux and change, then, as the modern orthodoxy has it, was accommodated to the rural environment.

What did British policy contribute to the pattern? The traditional historiography of Indian history, whatever the radical differences of interpretation, was based on a common assumption about the power of the imperial rulers. Whether the results were good or bad, British policy decisions were seen as automatically seminal to developments in the indigenous economy and society. Modern scholarship has delighted in undermining these assumptions: from all-powerful pro-consuls of European civilisation and capitalism, British officials have become baffled victims of a complex society. The extreme, reached perhaps in Frykenberg's *Guntur District*,²¹ is to view particularly revenue policy as the plaything of powerful local forces, indeed not as a 'policy' at all in the sense of some organised centrally directed momentum. Decisions, it is argued, had to be taken entirely pragmatically if the vital land revenue which paid for British rule was to emerge from the 'silent village'.²² Even then, it only emerged fitfully and on conditions dictated by local society.

This view is right to stress the weaknesses of British power. The most obvious is the simple numerical position, which left the small number of Europeans in the countryside as overlords of a large Indian-staffed bureaucracy which could evolve its own compromises on the ground. Policy was clearly adapted greatly by interaction with local conditions. However, it is one thing to stress the problems policy faced and its shaping by rural reality in implementation and quite another to imply the absence of any active role. Policy evolution and its complex effects should remain one of the fundamental organising principles of British Indian history. On this, as on the vitality of economic and social change, the pendulum is ready – and needs – to swing back somewhat.²³

The argument can be amplified by looking at two broad areas. Nobody now would see Indian society at the British takeover as some empty canvas to be filled by the new rulers or as so riven with 'anarchy' that

21 See R. E. Frykenberg, *Guntur District, 1788–1848: a History of Local Influence and Central Authority in South India* (Oxford, 1965).

22 The phrase is Frykenberg's. See *ibid.*, p. 230.

23 There are some signs of this occurring in the sections on 'Agrarian Relations' in Kumar, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 2.

traditional social forms and structures had dissolved. The British inherited a sophisticated rural economy and society and the stream of continuity in their development continued across the changeovers of power. Nevertheless, the annexations of each of the major provinces provided that crucial moment in their histories – equivalent to 1789 in France and 1917 in Russia – when, with a radical change of government, the new rulers, for all their weakness and lack of local power and knowledge, possess the self-confident vitality to try to impose their ideals. The formation of the land revenue ‘systems’ was a product of this. However much they were altered or reduced to a lowest common denominator of pragmatic tax gathering on the ground, a momentum of applied principles still remained. It is the interaction between that momentum and local conditions which provides one of the dominant influences on Indian agrarian development.

Again, Indian governments have been characterised frequently as *laissez-faire* in their economic and social policy. Yet, compared with other imperial societies and the Third World in general in the nineteenth century, the intervention of government in rural affairs is striking. This was the product not only of the security fears of foreign rulers but also of the inundation of official reports and commissions which brought problems to light and of the ideology of administrators who needed to try to ‘improve’ society to justify their existence. Bombay officialdom made its own unique contribution here. In 1879 the Bombay government enacted the Deccan Agriculturists’ Relief Act: this attempted to ameliorate alleged exploitation of poor peasants by regulating credit and debt transactions between moneylenders and agriculturists in the Deccan districts, a direct interference in village relationships. Of course, the effects of such agrarian legislation in India were complex. Occasionally it proved so totally untuned to the actualities of rural life that the impact was superficial. Invariably the results were far from what the rulers expected. Even so, the chemistry of reaction between official activity and local reality typically produced a blend of forces which could prove highly influential in shaping agrarian society. For this reason, government policy will provide an important element in our story.

This brief review will have served its purpose if it introduces to the reader the broad issues which underlie this study. Already he may have realised that the empirical basis for many of the arguments is still not very substantial. It may be that, granted the inadequacies of Indian statistics, definitive statements on long-term provincial economic trends will never be safely made. Again, local variation, particularly in social structure and change, may be so intense as to invalidate much generalisation even at regional level. However, one way forward, arguably, is for more provin-

cial case studies of economic and social development in the countryside. This is an attempt to provide one.

The Bombay Presidency, 1850–1935

The choice of region for study reflects the belief in the importance of British government and its processes, for the Bombay Presidency had no obvious overriding geographical or cultural unity. It was an administrative entity, solely the creation of British rule and replaced since Independence by more logically constructed, linguistically defined states.²⁴ In fact Bombay was arguably the most heterogeneous of all the British Indian provinces, the territories it administered including Aden and the province of Sind, a major region of modern Pakistan. However, the area discussed in this book is the 'Bombay Presidency proper', that is excluding Sind and the overseas territories but including all parts of the British Presidency contained within the modern state of India.

This region was formed exclusively by the pattern of conquest. A British stake in western India stemmed back to Charles II's marriage treaty and the early trading posts at Salsette Island and Surat remained of commercial importance throughout the eighteenth century. However, the bulk of the Bombay Presidency was created, relatively swiftly, by two major early nineteenth-century blocks of conquest: the districts of Gujarat won in 1802–3 and the Deccan and Konkan regions acquired at the fall of the Poona Peshwa in 1818.²⁵ The unit so formed comprised most of the western coastline of the sub-continent from the wastes of Kutch to beyond Goa, plus the inland territory whose natural administrative centre was Poona. It never wandered more than 200 miles from the coast and the boundaries did not follow any notable geographical features. In addition, the Presidency's misshapen form was compounded by the existence of several large princely states like Kolhapur and Baroda eating into the British-ruled districts: in 1872 the total area and population of the Bombay princely states amounted to well over half the totals for the British Presidency.²⁶ Within the Bombay Presidency, only a common basic religion – nearly four-fifths of the population were Hindus in

24 The modern state which grew out of the British Bombay Presidency was Maharashtra, designed to encompass all major Marathi-speaking areas including some not previously in Bombay. In 1960 Gujarat was separated from Maharashtra and constituted as a distinct state, thereby recognising the fundamental cultural and linguistic divide within western India.

25 Some additions were made later; for example, Satara was one of Dalhousie's annexations.

26 See *Census of the Bombay Presidency, 1872* (Bombay, 1875), Part 2, para. 627.

1872²⁷ – papered over deep cultural and linguistic differences. The fundamental distinction was between the Marathi-speaking regions of the Deccan and Konkan, and Gujarat with its own language and traditions.

Why, then, examine so diverse and apparently ill-integrated a region? The unity imposed by a common administration in the British period is not the sole justification: the political history of the different districts had been interlinked long before. Shivaji's empire had brought much of the region under one administration and the influence of its officials, mainly 'the Brahman and Prabhu castes of the Maratha desh', had been 'diffused throughout the area of Maratha power'.²⁸ Chitpavan Brahmins, the most ubiquitous and powerful of these groups, could be found as administrators in the eighteenth century in districts as far-ranging as Baroda and Kolhapur.²⁹ At the same time, traders too migrated between Gujarat and Maharashtra.³⁰ By 1850 the ubiquity of the Gujarati Vania or, from further north, the Marwari as moneylender and dealer in many a Deccan village matched that of the Chitpavans and the Deshastha Brahmins as civil servants. These were regions, then, with a tradition of inter-change and association. To this was added some social affinity between the established proprietary and cultivating groups on the land over much of the Presidency. The vast Kunbi caste in most areas epitomised the western Indian peasant farmer. The 1881 Census enumerated over 52 per cent of all the Presidency's agriculturists as 'Kunbis' and the allied Gujarati 'Kanbis' provided a further nearly 5 per cent.³¹ Underneath this broad umbrella, it is true, the status and claims of the sub-units in the different localities varied subtly. In the central Deccan the 'Maratha' Kunbis represented the generality of proprietary cultivators; the 'Patidar' Kunbis of Gujarat comprised a more exclusive elite.³² Even so, the extent of the landholdings of those who called themselves some type of 'Kunbi' gave the pattern of ownership throughout most of western India some semblance of homogeneity.

This, then, is the justification for studying the province: common political traditions – though the force and impact of Maratha rule varied widely from locality to locality and provides a major reason for variations in social history – and some social cohesion, completed, of course, by the

27 Ibid., para. 228.

28 John Roberts, 'The Movement of Elites in Western India under Early British Rule', *The Historical Journal*, 14, 2, June 1971, p. 243.

29 Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism. Bombay and the Indian National Congress 1880–1915* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 58.

30 Roberts, 'The Movement of Elites in Western India', p. 242.

31 *Census of India, 1881* (Bombay, 1882), Bombay, Vol. 2, Tables, Appendix C, Table 3.

32 On the Patidars, see David F. Pocock, *Kanbi and Patidar. A Study of the Patidar Community of Gujarat* (Oxford, 1972).

British creation of one united political and administrative entity. Otherwise, there is diversity and the opportunity to examine the impact of a common administrative and revenue organisation on regions different geographically and agriculturally. Like Washbrook's Madras, the Bombay Presidency contained distinct areas of wet-crop and dry-crop agriculture.³³ Throughout the southern bulk of the Presidency the division was created by the backbone ridge of the Western Ghat mountains running north-south some fifty miles from the Arabian Sea. The coastal strip and the Ghat spurs invited rain but, in so doing, they robbed the regions further east. As a rule in Bombay, the further east the less it rained. At Ratnagiri on the coast an average of over 101 inches of rain fell in each of the 28 years ending in 1878.³⁴ At Sholapur in the East Deccan, in contrast, the average annual rainfall for the period 1873-82 stood at just over 31 inches.³⁵ These climatic variations ensured fundamental differences in agricultural and social systems. On the coast, even though grain cultivation was widespread, wet-crop agriculture and a relatively large population could be sustained. The further east one went, progressively lower population density, larger units of landownership and greater dependence on millet foodgrains were necessary for peasant agriculture to survive.

The progression of this change was evident from taluk to taluk, occasionally even from village to village. Nevertheless, the geographer can generalise and firmly point to four basic regions within the Bombay Presidency. The largest was the great plateau-land to the east of the Ghat spurs, the Deccan. In the British period the Deccan comprised six administrative districts: Khandesh and Nasik in the north, Ahmednagar, Poona, Satara and Sholapur. Here the low rainfall of typically 20 to 40 inches per year was matched by soil conditions of variable quality. As a result, the Deccan was supremely a millet-growing area: higher quality cereals like wheat were less common than in north India and 'probably no region of the sub-continent, comparable in size, has so little rice'.³⁶ Jowar and bajra, the most important varieties of local millet, therefore

33 Washbrook has made the distinctions between the areas of wet-crop and dry-crop agriculture a crucial determinant of differential patterns of social structure and change in his accounts of the Madras Presidency. See D. A. Washbrook, 'Country Politics: Madras 1880-1930', *Modern Asian Studies*, 7, 3, July 1973, pp. 155-211, and *The Emergence of Provincial Politics. The Madras Presidency 1870-1920* (Cambridge, 1976).

34 *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* (hereafter BG), Vol. 10, *Ratnagiri and Savantvadi* (Bombay, 1880), p. 23.

35 BG, Vol. 20, *Sholapur* (Bombay, 1884), p. 6.

36 O. H. K. Spate, *India and Pakistan. A General and Regional Geography* (London, 1954), p. 648.